

2010

Memoirs – At UCWI 1951-55

It was in October 1951 that I arrived at the campus of the University College of the West Indies (UCWI). I was not in a jubilant mood, especially as I had listened to a conversation on the plane between 2 Guyanese who were going up for their second year. Everything they said made campus life sound beyond my reach. They spoke in a very sophisticated vein and, when they laughed, the humour was beyond me. By the time the plane touched down at the Kingston airport, I was wet through with perspiration and possessed of a strong desire to go back to Guyana.

At the airport, the newly arriving Trinidadians were absolutely exuberant, almost boastful. They carried with them the conviction that they had come from the finest schools in the Caribbean and they were going to make the rest of us fully aware of that. The Barbadians moved about with an Olympian, but polite self-confidence, neither loud nor boastful. The West Indians from the other islands were of an inquiring sort, and, in getting to find out who I was, they asked a great deal of questions. Everyone assumed that I just had to be a Queen's College graduate and their questions showed how strongly they believed that. My answers to them were laconic, especially as I realized that it would not do my position any good if I mentioned Central High School as my alma mater. That would come sometime later. } Alter

When we arrived on campus, there was a jolly committee assembled to receive us – a committee that possessed a strong sense of hierarchy. Because I was an "Open Scholar", I was awarded a certain degree of preference which did not sit well with my Guyanese brethren and puzzled the others. On the road to Mona, I had to answer more questions, this time about my parents, my religious affiliations and my general philosophical outlook. That made me even more nervous, since my background seemed so different from what they expected, and I continued to wonder how in heavens I was ever going to fit into campus life. It was one of the Barbadians who said with a broad smile, that the Anglican ministry was where I was headed. When I asked him how he came by that knowledge, he revealed that over the summer he had a job in the registry and had read about my credentials. Again, at the end of that conversation, I was almost shaking, because there was so little to tell, compared with the Barbadians, the Trinidadians, the Jamaicans and all the rest. No correct

I was to assigned a room in Irving Hall, which was essentially a small orderly set of new buildings, that included a Porters' Lodge, a dining hall, a hall for meetings and meals, and four dormitories, two for women and two for men. The only other accommodation on campus was called "Gibraltar Hall", originally put up to house refugee families from Gibraltar who had fled the Nazis during WWII. They had returned home by then, and it had become a residence designated mostly for those being trained as doctors, and scientists, with a sprinkling of arts students.

a dining hall which also served as meetings place for debating issues and for formulating documents directed to the Vice-Chancellor

I distinctly remember my year in Irving Hall, because my room was a stone's throw from a noisy quarry which rumbled every night except for Christmas and Easter. It was a far cry from rhythms of insects, tree frogs and sparse traffic at home. I realized how much I adjusted, when I would be aroused from my sleep if the quarry machines stopped. There other strains through the night including Trinidadian Calypsos, Barbadian "ole talk" and robust Jamaicans who seemed to need little sleep.

During my first term, I was treated with a great deal of respect, as an Open Scholar. By the end of the term, that respect had withered due my weak academic results. Academics had played second fiddle to other success stories, as I became president of the SCM, was noted for my debating skills and had discovered campus social life. [The one subject that sparked my attention and diligence was West Indian History, taught by that superb and engaging scholar, Dr. Elsa Goveia. Her lectures gave me a fascination with West Indian History which would later sparkmy students at Queen's College, give me an impetus for radio broadcasting on West Indian History and ~~which is still with me today~~. She also showed me how to write a history essay which is not clogged with factual details but conveys a sense of the era that is being discussed. I also enjoyed her tea parties which included stories of local politics and showed us how to link the present to the past. We remained in contact, and she was pleased when I completed studies at Cambridge and was later chosen to do the UWI Graduation address in 1969, when I was teaching at the University of Guyana. She died just a few years later, and I was honoured to do a radio broadcast in Guyana about her life and her work.

The Student Christian Movement played a significant part in my time on campus. Friends on campus, particularly Sheila Evans-Smith, introduced me to the UWI branch and I became a very enthusiastic member. Raised in the High Anglican tradition, the SCM broadened my perspective and brought into my theological outlook, a great deal of realism. This realism was enforced when I attended an international SCM conference which had chosen Cuba, of all places, as its setting. In Cuba, I met a number of European

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